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ABSTRACT

Institutional vitality in higher education and measures of vitality are considered. Vitality may be viewed as the capacity of a college or university to incorporate organizational strategies that support the continuing investment of energy by faculty and staff both in their own careers and in the realization of the institution's mission. Institutional vitality in the 1980s must be understood in relation to the organizational consequences of both steady-state and decline. Organizational theories, institutional histories, and biographies of important academicians are cited that may illuminate the issue of vitality. An important idea pertaining to institutional vitality is Kanter's (1979) view of opportunity structure. Kanter argues that when times are not prosperous, the institution must pay attention to its quality as an organization. Kanter addresses ways in which opportunity and power related to jobs and organizations are critical to motivation and leadership effectiveness. Peterson's (1980) emphasis on faculty response to decline and the ability of individuals in the organizations to lead effective professional lives leads to an emerging literature on faculty careers, including Rice's (1980) investigation of the professorial careers of former Danforth fellows, and Furniss's (1981) challenge to the "one life-one career" model. Indicators and scales for measuring vitality include: the Institutional Functioning Inventory (Peterson et al., 1970), Likert's Organizational Survey Profile (1976), the International Communication Association's Communication Audit, and Scott's (1980) institutional indicators. (SW)

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INSTITUTIONAL VITALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Institutional vitality in higher education

Thomas H. Maher

Institutional vitality is assumed to be an essential characteristic of a successful college or university. The language used in discussing vitality—"good morale," "renewal," "adaptability," "innovation," "high energy," and "organizational health"—evokes positive connotations. Although the key decisions facing American higher education in the 1980s will concern economics, it is appropriate and probably imperative to keep the issue of institutional vitality before academic decision makers.

Toward definition

The greatest challenge in reviewing studies of an ambiguous concept like vitality is to arrive at a working definition of the term. (We all know what it is, but we cannot explain it.) Lewis Thomas in his *Lives of a Cell* (1974) provides insight into the nature of institutional vitality as he describes the audience leaving the weekly Friday night lecture at the Marine Biological Laboratory:

> As the audience flows out, there is the same jubilant descant, the great sound of crowded people explaining things to each other as fast as their minds will work. You cannot make out individual words in the mass, except that the recurrent phrase, "But look," keeps bobbing above the surf of language.
>
> Not many institutions can produce this spontaneous music at will, summer after summer, year after year. It takes a special gift and the Marine Biological Laboratory appears to have been born with it. The scale is very small and it is not at all clear how it works, but it makes a nice thought for a time when we can't seem to get anything straight or do anything right.

In order to understand the organizational factors and strategies that make possible the kinds of experiences Thomas describes, it is necessary to return to the decade of the '60s. Then, a popular work by John Gardner (1964) entitled *Self Renewal* provided a new sense of possibility and intensified interest in the adaptive and regenerational capacities of both individuals and organizations.

It was in this intellectual climate that the most extensive effort to date to gain the measure of institutional vitality was initiated—the Institutional Vitality Project under the leadership of Earl McGrath (then at Teachers College, Columbia) with support from the Kettering Foundation. Among the documents associated with the project is a fascinating transcript of several conversations among a group of educational researchers including McGrath, Richard Centra, Morris Keeton, Warren Bryan Martin, and JB Lon Hefferlin (Peterson and Loye 1967). In this discussion, terms such as "self-critical" and "self-perpetuating" are associated with vitality. Much of their conversation seemed oriented toward defining institutional vitality as a function of the adaptive capacity of colleges and universities.

The events, issues, and trends of the past 15 years do not negate this work. Indeed, the appearance and wide acceptance of curricular innovation, faculty development, instructional improvement, and organizational development practices in colleges and universities attest to the strength and popularity of the ideas of adaptation and renewal.

However, a host of issues have entered the arena since the McGrath project, and they have tended to cloud rather than clarify our understanding of institutional vitality. New and ominous titles began to appear: *The New Depression in Higher Education* (Cheit 1971), *Managers of Decline* (Boulding 1975), and "People Planning in Post-Secondary Education in a World of Decremental Budgets" (Bailey 1974). Economic decline, collective bargaining, additional layers of bureaucracy, less faculty mobility, and increasing resort to the courts all add complex new dimensions to the idea of vitality provided by the McGrath project.

Continuing a search for a working definition of vitality, Maher and Ebben (1979) suggest that a vital college or university is one that:

- possesses a clearly defined, shared and accepted mission,
- has attainable proximate goals and programs which enable fulfillment of the mission, and
- sustains a climate which empowers individuals to be participants in the fulfillment of the mission and to have the sense of being involved in a creative, productive and energizing worklife.

A later elaboration of this definition (Maher 1981) focused upon the quality of institutional life or the ability of the organization:

- to provide its members with the proper level of security and respect,
- to introduce, on a continuous basis, a complementary level of challenge and stimulation to call forth creativity, and
- to recognize those who have made significant contributions in its behalf.

In essence, then, the quest for vitality might be said to focus on the capacity of a college or university to create and sustain the organizational strategies that support the continuing investment of energy by faculty and staff both in their own careers and in the realization of the institution's mission.

Broader avenues of inquiry

An array of disciplines provide other insights into the concept of vitality. In *Open Systems: Arenas for Political Action*, Kariel (1968) argues that organizations must provide "spaces" or settings in which their members can "try on" new roles and invent new possibilities. Books and articles on adult development, notably *Adaptation to Life* (Vaillant 1979), may provide some understanding of the response of aging faculty to emerging issues in higher education.

American higher education appears to be facing a period of leveling off, if not decline. The consequences of this condition will, of course, be felt differentially. An understanding of institutional vitality in the 1980s will require an understanding of the organizational consequences of both steady-state and decline. Insight can be gained from literature in the fields of sociology (especially human ecology), anthropology, and community psychology. Gallaher and Padfield (1980), for example, look at the factors that underlie the phenomenon of decline in towns and regions and at the consequences for their inhabitants.

Katz and Kahn (1978) present a systems view of organizations that can be helpful in thinking about the processes that are essential to sustaining vitality. The frame of reference offered here provides an initial insight into both the systemic nature of organizational roles

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and the way in which organizations mediate with the environment. The developmental context is covered in a work by Kimberly, Miles, and Associates (1980) titled *The Organizational Life Cycle*.

The recent work by Ouchi (1981) and others on Japanese management and Theory Z, with its emphasis on the development of trust and the integration of effort in organizations, would seem to corroborate the view expressed in the definitions of vitality that have been advanced. Maccoby, whose book *The Gamesman* (1976) altered views of managerial style, has recently written *The Leader* (1981), in which he attempts to show the emergence of a new type of leader, interested in creating an organizational environment in which the growth and development of persons is supported for its own sake.

A number of institutional histories and biographies of important academicians can illuminate the issue of vitality. The biography of Kenneth Boulding (Kerman 1974) and the history of the now-extinct Black Mountain College (Duberman 1972) provide glimpses of vital people and vital institutions. Although Black Mountain always seemed on its last legs, the excitement of its being is brought to life by Duberman.

A number of histories of higher education picture both stagnant and vital institutions of higher learning. Veysey (1965) underscores the tremendous vitality of the idea of specialization and of its consequent manifestation in the cultural environment of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This stands in marked contrast to Bledstein's (1977) graphic portrait of the moribund institutions of higher learning prior to the Civil War. Robert Nisbit's two works (1969, 1980) provide a history of the way we think about progress, social change, and decay.

All this work, and much that it is not possible to mention here, is prologue to a review of research on the issue of institutional vitality. The challenge is to *translate* and weave together the emerging ideas into questions and insights that may eventually serve to capture the phenomenon of institutional vitality.

Vitality in higher education

Perhaps the single most important idea that has emerged in recent years pertaining to institutional vitality is that of opportunity structure (Kanter 1979). When times are not prosperous, Kanter argues, no institution can afford not to pay attention to its quality as an organization. She is concerned about the quality of education when faculty are demoralized and administrators feel overused and underappreciated. Kanter helps us think about ways in which opportunity and power related to jobs and organizations are critical to motivation and leadership effectiveness. Opportunity, in her view, is not limited to promotion, but involves challenges and increases in influence, skill, and pay.

Kanter points out that many institutions of higher learning are organized so that access to opportunity is extremely difficult for many members of the organization. In particular, she argues that promotional paths are fuzzy, it is difficult to cross from one to another, and that many career ladders are extremely short, generating a class of persons whom she labels as "the stuck."

The problem of vitality is compounded when the academic profession and its institutions are in a state of real or perceived decline. Peterson (1980) views this issue from an organizational behavior perspective. His concern encompasses the social organizational patterns of the faculty and their relationship to the institution in a period of decline. Although Peterson contends that maintaining professional and productive lives and quality education in this kind of organizational environment is extremely difficult, he presents a valuable charting of institutional, governance, and faculty behaviors and tasks that provides a comprehensive view of anticipated problems and possible responses.

Peterson's emphasis on faculty response to decline and the ability of individuals in the organization to lead effective professional lives leads us to an emerging literature on faculty careers. Rice's (1980) investigation of the professorial careers of former Danforth fellows provides a disquieting view of the erosion of idealism at mid-career. Many of these former academic idealists are now asking, "Is this all there is?"

Building on the concerns about career stagnation, creeping cynicism, and eventual disengagement in academic careers, Furniss (1981) challenges the "one life-one career" model so tightly held by so many faculty members. He sees a narrowing of opportunities and blighted careers in the offing for many older faculty.

Furniss's admonitions to the academic profession reflect our previous concerns about the ability of faculty careers (in general) to flourish in the kinds of organizations universities have become and in a period of decline. His suggestions include:

- move toward a central vision of the academic career based on an intellectual ideal. . . . What intellectual qualities make the professor suitable for work in government, business, the clergy, as well as a college?
- aim to broaden rather than narrow opportunities for using the faculty member's talents and interests.
- aim to increase the scope and depth of those talents and interests.
- encourage nonacademic contacts and activities.
- encourage debate about faculty careers.

Baldwin et al. (1981) corroborates Furniss's concerns and offers a compendium of resource that have been helpful in focusing attention on the problems and opportunities associated with contemporary faculty careers. Bevan (1979) believes that existing reward systems restrict faculty aspirations, and he suggests program ideas to offer faculty new avenues of endeavor and potential recognition.

Brown (1974) was one of the first practitioners to recognize the need to enrich the options from which a faculty member could create a revitalizing task or project. He lists the role of the academic planning officer (and other academic administrators) as fourfold:

- to motivate faculty to plan for themselves.
- to liberate faculty from traditional or habitual modes of thought.
- to be a "fountain of knowledge" concerning new ways to extend faculty effectiveness.
- to provide structures and organizational formats that allow an institution, or part of an institution, to revise and redirect its plans with minimum effort.

In a later report, Brown (1980) writes of a project designed to provide resources for the renewal of chief academic administrators. Scott (1979) has written an important paper dealing with the prospects for middle-level administrators in the current organization of American higher education. The work of Pace (1980) in the development of an instrument to measure quality of effort on the part of students could serve to help create a new dimension in our thinking about institutional vitality.

Finally, a project underway at the American Association for Higher Education is aimed at synthesizing many of the elements of institutional vitality into an action project. The task centers on the development of a "faculty opportunities audit," by which institutions can assess how their policies enhance or inhibit faculty growth and vitality, and examples of model programs in faculty career development.

Earlier, a working definition of vitality suggested that a vital institution needed to provide complementary amounts of security and challenge. It could be that the evaluation system employed by the institution may play a major role in creating this precarious organizational balance. Scriven (1981) argues that a fair evaluation system must include *both* faculty and administrators and be backed by opportunities to enable faculty to improve their teaching. Colleges and universities, he argues, generally do an abysmal job of evaluation and must pay far greater attention to both the ethical and scientific aspects of evaluation. Suffice it to say that studies of faculty and staff perceptions of evaluation and the way in which evaluative data are used may provide a rich new way of understanding an important component of institutional vitality.

Measures of vitality

The Institutional Functioning Inventory (IFI) (Peterson et al. 1970) resulted from probably the most intensive and highly visible effort to design a measure of institutional vitality. The IFI grew out of the McGrath project at Teachers College, Columbia, and was developed by the Educational Testing Service. It evolved in the context of concepts such as "systematic institutional renewal," "academic reform," "incremental change," and educational "effectiveness." The instrument itself was designed to yield 11 scales: intellectual-aesthetic extracurriculum; freedom; human diversity; concern for the improvement of society; concern for undergraduate learning; democratic governance; meeting local needs; self-study and planning; concern for advancing knowledge; concern for innovation; and institutional esprit.

Of all these scales, "institutional esprit" probably comes closest to addressing the issues of vitality as they are discussed here. Yet, the index does not address the question of faculty compensation and its potential for decline. Legal matters do not enter the picture, and personnel policies are dealt with only in a marginal fashion.

Another inventory, Likert's Organizational Survey Profile (1976), incorporates scales such as "motivational," "organizational communication," "technological readiness" (ability of the organization to support initiatives from faculty and staff) and "lateral coordination," "supervisory leadership," and "openness." The survey is administered to work groups (e.g., departments), and its results can suggest level of work group cohesiveness, degree of conflict, effectiveness of communication, and other "life signs" in an institution.

Internal communication patterns are a critical element in efforts to sustain and enhance vitality. Poor communication can undermine the best-conceived effort to create a dynamic institution. In fact, communication patterns in many institutions can isolate individuals and groups, thus sowing the seeds of bitterness and eventual conflict. Goldhaber (1978) describes the International Communication Association's Communications Audit. The audit is actually a survey that enables members of an organization to indicate their perceptions of their communication system—that is, the information they are receiving currently and the information they need but are not receiving. Among the products of this instrument are: an organizational profile of *perceptions* of communication events, practices, and procedures; a map of the operational communication network for rumors, social messages, and job-related messages that lists all group members, liaisons, and isolates and identifies potential bottlenecks and gatekeepers; and a set of general recommendations.

These surveys are useful in gaining a macro-sense of the circumstances of vitality. Yet, they are expensive and time consuming and, in practice, are not often administered on a periodic basis.

Administrators interested in maintaining vitality might best be served by a set of social and financial indicators that can easily be monitored on a longitudinal basis. Scott (1980) has devised a set of 65 institutional indicators that he believes to be indicators of institutional vitality sensitive to subtle shifts in the academic climate. His indicators reflect both the academic and fiscal environment of an institution. A related checklist (O'Neill and Barnett 1981) examines a college's vital signs. This study, primarily aimed at trustees, argues for attention to such indicators as student attrition, over-optimistic income estimates, and rapidly increasing short-term debt.

In another work, Maher (1982) offers a list of questions that can be asked of faculty or administrators interested in organizational health. Included in this listing are the following:

- How often have you said "they" in reference to the administration (or faculty)?
- To what extent have you passed on unsubstantiated rumors or attributed motives to others on campus?
- When was the last time you were really excited about something that happened in your institution?
- Is this institution a good place for you in the long run? Can you see yourself here in ten years? Is what you see a good image?

In addition, Maher (1981) looks at the number of intensive "faculty projects" in an institution as an indicator of vitality. A "project," in this view, is a set of activities through which a faculty member moves toward a goal in a prescribed period of time. Projects serve to focus interest and intensify effort and require a basic commitment of time and effort from the faculty member. Writing a book, seeking a research grant, and designing a new course are all "projects." A "project" stands in marked contrast to the ongoing maintenance performance of faculty chores such as committee work and the teaching and re-teaching of the "same" course with no eye toward renewal. "Projects," in this use of the term, are foci of energy and their widespread existence among a faculty does attest to the presence of vigor.

Further questions

A review of this nature brings to the surface a host of questions. The past decade, for example, has seen the rise of faculty militancy and subsequent collective bargaining. Naples (1978) and others address the issue and see the possibility for erosion of vitality. However, much more needs to be learned about the survival of vitality in an institution where adversarial relationships are endemic.

Recognition appears to be an important element of vitality in colleges and universities. Yet we seem to know very little about how it functions. For example, it would seem possible that too much recognition could begin to debase its own value.

Short-term vitality is another interesting subject. Some colleges and universities come alive when their intercollegiate athletic teams are successful. Academic departments sometimes reach new heights of vitality on the occasion of a guest scholar or a special symposium. Certainly, the arrival of new leaders on the campus fuels a burst of institutional energy. Unfortunately, many of these situations do not sustain such a level of vitality. Perhaps there are factors involved in the advent of this short-term enthusiasm that could yield clues as to the nature of sustained vitality.

Personal experience suggests that vitality varies from unit to unit, especially in a large university. Why is it, for example, that one department can appear zestful and productive while the department in adjacent offices seems moribund or ridden with conflict?

Another potentially fruitful arena of research is that of institutional personnel policies. The impact of search procedure on vitality and the organizational consequences of a tenure policy would seem to influence the degree to which an institution can sustain vitality. In the context of this study, personnel policies could be seen either to encourage or discourage the development of new opportunities. The work of Smith (1978) provides good insight into these kinds of questions, but more study is needed.

Perhaps one of the most important determinants of vitality is the relationship between the expectations of the faculty and the abilities and motivations of the students. Bogen (1978) has opened the door to more research on this relationship, but it would seem that student-faculty fit is a critical nexus in terms of the capacity of the institution to sustain vitality in the long run.

The relationship of instructional and program innovation to the maintenance of vitality suggests more questions. Many look to a level of innovation as an index of vitality. Yet, in some instances, a high level of innovation may correlate negatively with vitality. Could it be that a tidal wave of innovation may be overwhelming? It might be hypothesized that each institution should attempt to sustain a level of innovation congruent to its purpose. Too little might paralyze responsiveness, and too much might overwhelm the capacity to manage it.

Conclusion

It is likely that 10 researchers asked to provide a bibliography of the 10 most important entries pertaining to the concept of vitality would produce 10 mutually exclusive sets of references. Perhaps the best measure of vitality in colleges and universities remains the question,

"Do you enjoy going to work each day?" In a quest for vitality, it may be that we are seeking an elusive chemistry that catalyzes a rare integration of individual and institutional energy, commitment, and creativity. The intellectual pursuit of such a phenomenon is difficult, replete with dead ends and wrong turns. For the sake of quality in our institutions and effectiveness in our educational programs, however, we had best renew the quest.

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